



# Migration and Lived Experiences of Racism: The Case of High-Skilled Migrants in Wrocław, Poland

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## Abstract

This article examines migrants' lived experiences with racism in Wrocław, Poland. Drawing on qualitative research conducted among high-skilled migrants, it analyzes various ways migrants encounter, understand, and cope with racism. Our case study broadens discussion about migration and racism by analyzing an Eastern European, post-socialist, predominantly "white" receiving society seldom researched in terms of racism. The article problematizes the assumption that high-skilled migrants experience only minor problems with incorporation. Furthermore, it suggests the importance of racial boundaries in a non-Western society that lacks a colonial background and long-standing relations with migrants. Therefore, our article contributes to a better understanding of how local settings inform the experiences of high-skilled migrants, which are often lost in abstract concepts of global flows and spaces.

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## Introduction

Poland is one of the largest migrant-sending countries in Eastern Europe and a vast reservoir of labor for many states in Western Europe (Goździak and Pawlak 2016). Some scholars describe Poland as a country with “emigration culture” because of migration’s centrality in Polish society (Okólski 2012), particularly after Poland’s accession to the European Union (EU). Opening borders and labor markets across Europe also resulted in an increase in migratory flows *to* Poland (Górny et al. 2009), which, as an EU member, has become an attractive destination for international capital and migrants (Okólski 2012). Nonetheless, even with a growing number of foreign residents, Poland remains one of the most homogenous societies in the EU (Mayblin, Valentine, and Winiarska 2016).

Post-accession migration to Poland includes high-skilled migrants, whom we conceptualize as those who have tertiary education, whose qualifications are recognized in the destination country, and who work in positions suited to their qualifications (Meier 2015). In recent years, high-skilled migrants have constituted a relatively large percentage of migrants coming to Poland; from 2005 to 2012, for example, 24 percent of all migrants in Poland had higher-education qualifications (Matkowska 2014). This group included highly skilled professionals, managers, academics, and company owners (Mucha and Łuczaj 2018). Most were employees of transnational corporations with established branches in Poland, usually in the larger cities of Kraków, Poznań, Warszawa, and Wrocław. For these mobile professionals working on temporary contracts, Poland is often just an “accidental stage in a relatively long chain of residence changes” (Górny et al. 2009, 25; Matkowska 2014).

Such context creates an interesting case for researching the connections between migration and racism, since it concerns both different experiences of high-skilled migrants, who are rarely studied as the victims of racial abuse (Kunz 2016), and Poland, which only recently began to receive migrants of various cultural backgrounds and is rarely analyzed in the context of racial prejudices toward migrants (Ząbek 2009; Nowicka 2018). This article focuses on high-skilled migrants in the Polish city of Wrocław, which, driven by neoliberal policy, strives to attract foreign capital and international professionals (Cervinkova 2013; Jaskulowski 2018). Drawing on qualitative research and critical race theory (Pérez Huber and Solorzano 2015), it aims to analyze how high-skilled migrants experience racism and the kinds of racial prejudices they encounter, as well as how they make sense of and cope with racism.

By presenting this new study, we broaden discussion on high-skilled migration and racism. Not only do we provide detailed analysis of how racism affects informants’ experiences, but we also contribute to understanding the complexity of high-skilled migrants’ incorporation in the context of neoliberal policy of urban development. In other words, by demonstrating that informants in our study experienced various types of racist incidents, we problematize existing scholarship,

which often assumes that migrant professionals' incorporation into local communities is a smooth process free of "exclusion and racism" (Kunz 2016, 94). For example, Nowicka (2007, 2012) claims that migrant professionals live transnational lives embedded in de-territorialized global space of flows, adapt easily to new habitats, and feel at home anywhere and everywhere (see also Sassen 2001; Castells 2011). In contrast, we demonstrate that in spite of their privileged status, high-skilled migrants are not immune to problems such as racial prejudices that are routinely faced by low-skilled migrants.

At the same time, however, we argue that it cannot be assumed simply by virtue of experiencing racism that informants themselves were free from prejudices and stereotypes. Our analysis indicates that study participants occupied a rather ambivalent and paradoxical position, informed by both experiences of racism and the neoliberal imaginary of individualism and economic worthiness. Thus, on the one hand, they were victims of racism, but on the other they themselves, in referring to global neoliberal discourse, constructed rigid boundaries between "desirable" and "undesirable" migrants and did not see racism as a social problem that required social solutions. We further nuance the picture of high-skilled migrants' incorporation by demonstrating how they may contribute to reproducing global hierarchies of power and inequalities, albeit based on class differences rather than race.

We also claim that although our study focuses on high-skilled migrants' experiences, it enables us to generalize about the significance of racial boundaries in Wrocław and wider Polish society as it posits a critical case study in Flyvbjerg's (2006) terms. Therefore, our study challenges the conventional view according to which Poland has been seen as a country without racial problems, in part because its non-white population is rather small and in part because Poland did not play an active role in colonialism (Nowicka and Łodziński 2001; Ząbek 2009; Nowicka 2018).

In what follows, we first introduce the rationale for our research, critically engaging and linking together various strands of literature concerning the study of racism, high-skilled migration, and racism in Poland. In doing so, we contextualize and embed our case study in relation to other research to highlight our contribution to wider discussions concerning racism and migration. Next, we contextualize our research site and present our methodological approach in greater detail. We subsequently draw on our research data and demonstrate high-skilled migrants' lived experiences of various types of racist attacks and incidents. This in-depth exploration of racial prejudices toward high-skilled migrants leads us to a more analytical approach, aimed at problematizing these migrants' incorporation processes and the hierarchical paradoxes of neoliberal imagery.

## Research Rationale

For the past few decades, there has been a growing literature on racism, including the relationship between racism and migration, especially in North America and

Western Europe (e.g., McConahay and Hough 1976; Pettigrew and Meertens 1995; Perlmutter 1999; Sears and Henry 2005; Wilkes, Guppy, and Farris 2008; Provine and Doty 2011). Much of this literature has been concerned with the changing nature of racism and has argued that due to the increasing lack of acceptance of racism, racial prejudices have taken more covert forms (McConahay and Hough 1976; Sears and Henry 2005; Lamont et al. 2016). However, existing research on the relationship between racism and migration pays little attention to post-socialist Eastern Europe. Although various studies have illustrated the longevity of the racism-migration nexus (Wilkes, Guppy, and Farris 2008), as well as its changes, social impact, and transnational dimension (Roth and Kim 2013), they are usually limited to Western post-colonial societies (Erel, Murji, and Nahaboo 2016). By focusing on a non-Western context, our article addresses this gap. More specifically, it contributes to the growing literature on racism and migration in three ways.

First, while most studies on racism, especially in the United States, focus on attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of perpetrators (Perlmutter 1999; Dixon 2004; Provine and Doty 2011), there is a growing tendency to examine everyday racism from the victims' perspective (Lamont and Mizrachi 2012; Mizrachi and Zawdu 2012; Lamont et al. 2016). This article adds to this discussion by drawing on critical race theory (Pérez Huber and Solorzano 2015) and positioning experiential knowledge as central to understanding racism. It accepts normative assumptions about the need to transform oppressive environments to eliminate racism. Following Swim et al. (2003), we agree that asking those who encounter racism about their experiences is more empowering than questioning perpetrators for victims' experiences and better suited to the study of contemporary racism, particularly its subtle and covert forms.

Second, although numerous studies on racism's nature and pervasiveness exist (Sears and Henry 2005; Pérez Huber and Solorzano 2015; Lamont et al. 2016; Roth 2016), the specific ways in which it functions in various settings often remain unclear (Alanya et al. 2017; Nowicka 2018). Contrary to research mostly done in North America or Western Europe with large migrant populations (e.g., Sears and Henry 2005; Wilkes, Guppy, and Farris 2008; Provine and Doty 2011), this article concentrates on the relatively under-researched theme of racism toward migrants in Poland, which has historically been perceived as an emigration country (Iglicka 2001). Equally important, as Nowicka (2018) notes in her literature review, Poland has conventionally been seen as a country without racial problems, in part because of its small non-white population but also because of its absence from colonialism (e.g., Nowicka and Łodziński 2001; Kłoskowska 2003; Ząbek 2009). For example, Kłoskowska (2003) explains that because "inter-racial" contacts were always scarce in Poland, racism has not been the subject of study in Polish social science. Similarly, Nowicka and Łodziński (2001) argue that the racial issue has never been a problem in Poland and that aversion toward other minority groups, such as Roma and Jews, is explained in terms of different historical experiences or social backgrounds (e.g., Michlic 2006; Świętek 2014). In the process, racism in Poland is

reduced to physical violence toward black migrants and is therefore not analyzed in relation to enmity toward other minority groups (Nowicka 2018).

Third, and in contrast to much of the literature on migration (e.g., Andall 2000; Cohen 2006; Akgunduz 2008; Panizzon, Zürcher, and Formale 2015), we focus on migrants who are privileged by class, education, and profession. Only recently has there been interest in high-skilled migrants, although mainly in the mobile international elite migrating to global cities like London or Singapore (Beverstock 2002, 2005; Meier 2015, 2016). Unlike underprivileged newcomers, high-skilled migrants are supposed to move easily and smoothly in a kind of disembedded space of global flows, to adapt easily to the cosmopolitan environment of global cities, and not to experience serious problems with incorporation (Findlay 1995; Sassen 2001; Ley 2004; Nowicka 2006; Knowles and Harper 2010; Castells 2011; Nowicka 2012). As Knowles and Harper (2010, 7) highlight, high-skilled migration is “suspected of creating only minimal disruption to migrants’ lives.” In a similar vein, Castells (2011) argues that high-skilled migrants belong to a global space of flows, networks, and interactions; they live transnational lives embedded in a de-territorialized cosmopolitan culture; they move easily between different locations; and they adapt to new habitats without any difficulties because the state recognizes them as economically desirable. For such professionals, Nowicka (2007, 83) suggests that home “can be geographically located anywhere and everywhere and, what is more important, it can move with you.”

To provide a counterpoint, we focus on a sub-section of the international elite, an under-researched and in-between category of middle-class migrants moving to a peripheral city (see Rutten and Verstappen 2014; Plöger and Becker 2015; Kunz 2016; Bielewska and Jaskulowski 2017). As we show, although migrant professionals to some extent occupy a privileged position, they also face exclusion and racism, particularly in the context of Poland’s implicitly “white” and homogenous society.

Our case study also has broader significance as a “critical case study,” to use Flyvbjerg’s (2006) terminology. The research site, Wrocław, is one of Poland’s main migration destinations and a successful Polish city in terms of economic development that has been officially branded as multicultural and open minded (Cervinkova 2013). Moreover, according to a recent survey, most of Wrocław’s inhabitants proclaim openness to foreigners, including refugees (Kokoszkiwicz 2016). Thus, if middle-class, privileged, and “desirable” migrants experience racism in a relatively open metropolitan area such as Wrocław, it may be concluded that similar incidents happen to much poorer and less “desirable” migrants in other Polish urban contexts.

## **Wrocław as “the Meeting Place”: Contextualizing the Research Site**

After the Second World War, because of the Holocaust and ethnic cleansing, Poland emerged as an ethnically homogenous country (for discussion, see Snyder 2003).

During the subsequent Communist period (1945–1989), it was a closed state and, due to various administrative restrictions, rather difficult for foreigners to enter (Iglicka 2001). The restrictive immigration policy of this time reflected distrust toward cultural and ethnic minorities (Mayblin, Valentine, and Winiarska 2016). Furthermore, because of economic stagnation, communist Poland was not an attractive destination for migrants in the first place (Iglicka 2001).

After the collapse of Communism and Poland's 2004 accession to the EU, the country started to attract more migrants (Okólski 2012). Nonetheless, in comparison to Western Europe, Poland's migrant population remains very low. According to Eurostat, foreign-born non-nationals made up 1.7 percent of the Polish population in 2017, the lowest ratio in the EU (Eurostat 2018). In contrast to many Western European societies, often described in terms of their "super-diversity" (Vertovec 2007), Poland is one of Europe's most ethnically "white" and homogenous societies.

The question of migration, thus, has not been the subject of serious public debate in Poland (Jaskulowski 2019). Migrants in Poland are much less visible in public spaces than in Western Europe, and most Poles have little opportunity for regular contacts with migrants (Mayblin, Valentine, and Winiarska 2016). As Mayblin, Valentine, and Winiarska (2016, 963) suggest, "this absence of regular encounters with 'difference' can make Polish people vulnerable to absorbing stereotypes," including racial ones. Moreover, the refugee crisis of 2015–2016 triggered the eruption of anti-Muslim racialized imaginaries fueled by right-wing politicians, journalists, and some Catholic clergy in Poland (Jaskulowski 2019). This right-wing rhetoric evoked the figure of the Muslim refugee as a "barbaric invader" who raped and killed Europeans (Pędziwiatr 2017). Building on this moral panic against refugees, Poland's right-wing Law and Justice Party won the parliamentary election in October 2015. With this victory, the party tightened its hold on public media, using Islamophobic and racialized discourse to mobilize supporters (*ibid.*). As a result, Islamophobic discourse gained a hegemonic position in the Polish public sphere. In combination with nationalist identity politics, such rhetoric may legitimize the use of discursive and physical violence against the "racialized Other" in Poland (Jaskulowski 2019).

Most migrants in Poland concentrate in large cities like Warsaw, Poznań, Kraków, or Wrocław (Mayblin, Valentine, and Winiarska 2016; Jaskulowski 2018; Mucha and Łuczaj 2018). Wrocław is Poland's fourth largest city, with a population of around 635,000 inhabitants. Located in the southwestern region of Lower Silesian Voivodeship, Wrocław has been termed "an iconic success story of Poland's economic" transformation, due to its ability to attract foreign investment and high-skilled migrants (Cervinkova 2013, 744). The city is home to branches of numerous multinational corporations, including IBM and Hewlett-Packard, which employ migrant professionals (Jaskulowski 2018). In the latest national census in 2011, there were approximately 4,800 foreign-born citizens in Lower Silesian Voivodeship, putting it second behind Masovian, which includes the capital city of Warsaw. National statistics do not provide more detailed information on the

distribution of migrants, but it may be assumed that most migrants in Lower Silesian Voivodeship live in Wrocław (ibid.). More than one third of them come from the neighboring countries of Germany and Ukraine; however, it should be emphasized that the census does not include recent Ukrainian migrants. Since the 2011 eruption of conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the number of Ukrainian migrants has increased considerably in Poland, with approximately 30,000 to 40,000 living in Wrocław alone (Jaskulowski 2018).

Although the share of migrants in Wrocław's overall population is relatively low, its residents regard the city as multicultural (Dolińska and Makaro 2013). This belief reflects the city's official narrative, which brands itself as a multicultural and open place with a cosmopolitan history. In promotional material, the city council describes Wrocław as *miasto spotkań* ("the meeting place"), which is a direct reference to Pope John Paul II, who visited Wrocław in 1997 and spoke about its rich German, Czech, and Austrian past. Such neoliberal branding strategies, along with the organization of mega-events (e.g., Euro 2012), represent attempts to position the city in the global economy and to attract tourists, foreign capital, and high-skilled migrants (Jaskulowski and Surmiak 2016).

## Methodological Approach

Our research is based on qualitative methodologies, which allow for in-depth explorations of everyday life and subtle racism (Sin 2005; Lamont et al. 2016). Following a qualitative approach, we did not start with a particular theory to test. Rather, our general epistemological framework was based on the constructivist premise that meaning is produced and reproduced by individuals through the process of social interactions (Elder-Vass 2012). We assume that "race" is a social construction with no biological foundation and that it is constituted by various racialization practices (Paul 2014; Fairbanks 2015). Although "races" do not exist as real social groups, there is still racism, which involves discriminating against those regarded as "others" (Gilroy 2000). As mentioned above, many studies argue that overt racist behavior has increasingly become deemed unacceptable, especially in societies with an imperial past (Pettigrew and Meertens 1995; Sears and Henry 2005). Contemporary racism thus extends beyond discrimination based on biological characteristics to include discrimination based on a range of cultural characteristics (Houshmand, Spanierman, and Tafarodi 2014). Due to the official branding strategy of depicting Wrocław as a multicultural and open city, one can expect that the city's official stance aims to avoid overtly racial behavior. Consequently, prejudice against minorities in Wrocław may be expressed in a subtler manner that is difficult to detect (Sin 2005).

In this study, we did not presume any specific definition of racial prejudice, allowing informants to decide whether they were "victims" of racism (Essed 1991). Some situations described by informants were characterized as ambiguous, since the "victims" were not themselves entirely sure about the perpetrators' racist

motivation. However, in most cases informants perceived themselves as targets of racist aggression because of their different physical appearances or ascribed cultural characteristics. The aim of our qualitative study is not to show the frequency of racial incidents but to give “voice” to those who have experienced them (Swim et al. 2013) and to demonstrate the extent to which they encountered and how they dealt with racism.

We used a semi-structured interview guide combined with open-ended questions, allowing informants to raise topics important to them. Our choice of methodological tools was driven by the difficulty of reaching international professionals working in multinational corporations, who often have busy schedules. Also, the semi-structured interview guide seemed more appropriate to conducting research in multinational corporations, which are usually reluctant to approve more ethnographic approaches, including participant observation (Bygnes 2008). One of the biggest obstacles we faced at the beginning of the study concerned finding and contacting informants. Given that corporations, which represent the main employers of high-skilled migrants in Wrocław (Jaskulowski 2018), do not keep public records and information about foreign employees, we used our personal networks, social media, and snowballing techniques to identify and reach informants.

The sample consisted of 32 semi-structured interviews (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006) conducted with middle-class migrant professionals. Informants had regular legal status and worked in either managerial positions or positions that required professional knowledge (e.g., IT, finances). They had academic degrees and were educated in a country other than Poland. We obtained informed consent to use the interviews for academic purposes, provided that informants remained anonymous. Since the community of high-skilled migrants in Wrocław is rather small, to secure anonymity and to prevent the identification of informants, we do not present any details about the corporations in which they worked.

Informants in this study came from various global regions, including India (9), the EU (8), North Africa and the Middle East (6), other African or Asian countries (5), and European countries outside the EU (4). They were mainly in their twenties and thirties. Eight were female, and 24 were male, reflecting what seems to be the demographic structure of migrant professionals in Wrocław (Jaskulowski 2018). In the context of the Polish “white” majority, most informants (20) would be considered “visible” minorities from India, North Africa, and East Asia. Most were single (19), with a smaller group who were married with children and had decided to move with their family to Wrocław. All marriages were endogamous, except one case of marriage to a Polish woman. There were also cases of informal relationships with Polish women. In terms of religious background, participants were Hindu, Muslim, Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and atheist.

Participants’ length of residence in Wrocław varied from a few months to six years, with an average of two to three years. Prior to coming to Poland, some had migrated and worked in other countries. Existing research shows that migrants often integrate into existing ethnic communities (Ryan 2011). Interviewees, however, not



only moved to Wrocław and remained independent of ethnic networks but generally did not integrate into existing migrant communities based on shared cultural backgrounds. Due to the lack of established migrant communities in Wrocław, interviewees were not able to rely on ethnic networks and found no institutional support from the city for incorporation. In addition, almost all informants reported limited contact with local inhabitants outside the workplace. Thus, the main site for local incorporation was the multinational corporate workplace, where participants established contacts and networks with co-workers (Polish and international) with similar social and educational backgrounds. Thus, informants were integrated into a specific multicultural and middle-class corporate environment of international and Polish professionals.

The research discussed in this article was conducted between May 2015 and May 2016. Each interview lasted from 45 to 120 minutes and took place in English (except for two, which were in Polish) in a “natural” setting, such as a workplace, home, or café. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. In the analysis, our point of departure was open coding, involving multiple close readings of our data to allow particular themes and categories to emerge, followed by focused coding to combine codes and categories that seemed interrelated. To enhance the credibility of our analysis, we coded separately and then compared and discussed the findings to achieve agreement (Saldaña 2012). To increase the quality of interpretation, one researcher functioned as a critical outsider, since he had not conducted interviews (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

## Lived Experiences of Racism in Wrocław

Our analysis revealed four broad themes of experiencing racism: *different modes of experiencing racism*: direct and indirect (“vicarious” and media racism); *various forms of racial aggression and micro-aggression*: physical aggression, threat of violence, verbal expression of prejudice, bad service in public or private establishments, and staring or glaring; *making sense of racism*: normalization and marginalization, historical explanation, homogeneity of Polish society, and media influence; and finally *different strategies of coping with racism*: ignoring, managing the self, avoidance strategies, seeking the company of Polish friends, and seeking comfort in a multicultural environment. We address each theme in turn, in what follows.

### Different Modes of Experiencing Racism

Regarding the different ways of experiencing racism documented in our study, the category of direct racism seems self-explanatory: racial prejudices personally experienced by informants. Yet they also discussed less obvious ways and situations of experiencing racism. For example, many witnessed racist incidents or heard stories

of racial abuse from friends and colleagues or through social media. For instance, Rajesh from India, who also had German citizenship, recalled,

I've heard from one colleague from Morocco. . . . It would be funny if it weren't so sad. . . . He was sitting on a bus. . . . His mum was calling from Morocco. . . . He was thinking, "Oh, I cannot talk in Arabic on a public bus. People will get mad." But he answered and talked with his mum, and the lady who was sitting next to him got so scared and pretended that she wanted to get out of the bus, but she just chose another place to sit.

This story should be read in the context of the aforementioned Islamophobia spread by right-wing politicians who equate Muslims and Arabs with invaders, criminals, and terrorists (Pędziwiatr 2017). It illustrates how an atmosphere of fear and suspicion translated into the daily lives of informants from the Middle East and North Africa, who encountered enmity and mistrust among local inhabitants.

Rajesh's story is an example of "vicarious" or "second-hand" racism, which refers to "a person's indirect experiences with racism, resulting from racism targeted directly to one or more other person in their environment" (Truong, Museus, and McGuire 2016, 225). This indirect racism played an important role in informants' accounts: through hearing stories from their friends or following social media accounts of racist incidents in migrants' social environments, they learned that their experiences of racial abuse were not isolated events but part of a wider social pattern (ibid., 238). Consequently, they developed consciousness of existing racism toward migrants in Wrocław. Such stories also strengthened their conviction that they themselves could be the target of racist attacks. Second-hand racism, thus, has negative consequences, similar to, if not so severe as, those caused by direct racism. It leads some to social avoidance and to not visiting certain places at certain times due to fear of racial abuse. For example, Deepak from India was frightened by a friend's story and confined his social activities: "my friends suffered such things. . . . My friend from France. . . he told me to avoid going to a nightclub or other public place after 10 pm. It's not safe. . . . I don't go out late."

Some informants also talked about "media" racism, referring to stereotypes produced by the racially biased mainstream media. Indeed, they complained that the Polish media was racist, especially in its representations of Muslim refugees and terrorist attacks, such as those in Paris in 2015 and Brussels in 2016. One informant, Amir from Pakistan, explained that he felt stigmatized because of his national and religious identity:

Sometimes it disturbs me. Because, when somebody says, "Well, you are from Pakistan," and then they hear so much news. . . . It hurts me because I don't have anything to do with this. No religion teaches you such things. The area in Pakistan where I come from has nothing to do with terrorists.

In his view, by making automatic associations between terrorism and Muslims, the Polish media spread racialized stereotypes. The presence of racism in the mainstream media convinced him that racism was not just a local but a nationwide problem in Poland. His story additionally exemplifies the detrimental effects of indirect media racism. Although Amir did not recall any personal experience of racial insults, he felt anxious and unsafe because he was afraid of becoming a target of racial abuse due to his stigmatized religious-national identity. His story also reflects the ambiguous and ambivalent position of high-skilled migrants in Wrocław, especially those considered “visibly” different. While Amir regarded himself as a highly “desirable” professional who brought new skills and knowledge to Polish society, at the same time he felt that he was not fully accepted, being deemed backward and dangerous by the receiving society.

### *Different Forms of Racial Aggression and Micro-Aggression*

Our analysis also distinguished between forms of racial aggression, which may be experienced both directly and indirectly. In our research, the least common form of racial aggression was physical assault, such as battery or robbery. However, as Dev from India recalled,

I heard that some racist attacks happen. . . . I’ve never seen that situation . . . , but . . . one of my friends was travelling on a tram, and some three or four guys started reacting in a way he didn’t like. They asked for money, and when he said, “I don’t have any,” they took him to the ATM and forced him to withdraw some.

This kind of incident sometimes involved physical violence such as punching or pushing, as reported in a conversation with Didier from France:

I was with my Moroccan friend, whose skin is darker. We were walking . . . , and suddenly one guy came and started pushing my friend. . . . I was shocked. . . . It was really weird, stressful. After that, we went home quietly.

Informants heard stories about or themselves witnessed physical violence, but none had been attacked personally, aside from one man who had his nose broken. However, when asked about the attack, he was not sure whether the attack was racist or a mugging irrespective of his appearance. This is therefore an example of an ambiguous situation, as the “victim” was uncertain of the perpetrators’ motivation.

More often, however, informants spoke of the *threat* of violence. In response to the question, “Have you ever experienced violence or threats?” Saanjh from India stated,

Threats, yes. Violence, no. For example, when I was coming back home late at night, there were some people. . . . They came close to me. . . . They used a word *kurwa* [Polish equivalent of f-word in English] a few times, and they left.

Another informant — Jasmin, also from India — recalled a situation on public transportation:

I was just traveling on a tram. I was alone, and it was afternoon. . . . One guy just came in front of me, and he was talking with very bad language and asking me to give him money. . . . I was really shocked.

In interviewees' recounting, such situations occurred most frequently in the city center, on public transportation, or near railway and bus stations. They also displayed similar patterns: some strange man (or group of men) insistently asking for money or cigarettes. Informants perceived such insistent requests as threats or attempts at extortion and were sure that they were targeted because they were perceived as "others."

While such racist behavior involved physical violence or threat of violence, the next category embraces *verbal* expressions of prejudice, as in the case of Omar from Tunisia:

Now I get a bit pale because of the lack of sun. But, for example, on Saturday I was with a friend in the center, and . . . we went for kebabs. . . . There was a queue, and suddenly some lad . . . started shouting: "Africa! Africa!" He looked at us with such denigration.

Owing to his dark skin, Omar was identified as coming from Africa, which, according to Poland's popular imagination, has negative connotations. In Poland, as in Western European colonial discourse in general, stereotypical and essentialized Africa refers to an "uncivilized troublesome land" inhabited by "primitive" and "unintelligent" blacks who merely play, fight, or rest (Ząbek 2009; Balogun 2018). Omar felt that he was perceived through the prism of stereotypical images of Africa and therefore overtly treated in a denigratory way by local residents.

Informants also reported other forms of verbal abuse from long-term residents: swearing, denying the right to stay in Poland, demanding that participants speak Polish in public, or "accusing" people of being refugees. The latter may be illustrated with a story from Rajesh:

I had to go to hospital here. . . . I was lying there with some people in one room, and somehow, we communicated. One of the guys said, "Where do you come from?"; "From Germany." "No. You are not German. You are from Syria. . . ." This is like, you know, a German must be tall and blond.

Rajesh, who had German citizenship and did not come from the Middle East, perceived this suspicious remark as insulting and racist. There was a clear message

for him: due to his phenotypic traits, he could not be a “real” German and was simply pretending to be one. Moreover, Rajesh felt that by allegedly unmasking his “true” Syrian identity, the hospital patient was suggesting that he is not merely an “other” but a threatening “other,” since in Poland today, Syrians are commonly associated with terrorism (Jaskulowski 2019). Privileged status therefore did not protect Rajesh from racial stereotyping.

The next category of racist behavior was a form of “micro-aggression,” which is defined as everyday and subtle verbal, nonverbal, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate prejudice toward people regarded as others (Houshmand, Spanierman, and Tafarodi 2014). Particularly disquieting for participants were instances of racial prejudice and discrimination in public venues, including state institutions (police stations, courts), which should guarantee equal treatment. For example, Saanjh, who had lived in Poland for several years, recalled,

I’m having a divorce case in court here. The judge made discriminatory statement. . . . For example . . . , my witness — an Indian woman — she talked about my family . . . , but the judge asked her, “How long have you stayed in Poland?” “More than two years,” she said. And the judge said, “So why don’t you learn Polish?!” What’s this? It’s not related to my case.

Saanjh felt that because of his foreign background, he was treated in a discriminatory way. Similar situations were encountered by other informants, who reported being ignored by shopkeepers, prevented from renting a flat, poorly served in restaurants, or maliciously asked by staff to speak Polish. Despite their high economic status and privileged position, some informants faced problems with access to various private or public services. Such experiences also convinced them that aversion to “others” was widespread and embedded in the everyday practices of daily life in Wrocław.

Another category of racial micro-aggression was staring and glaring (Swim et al. 2003). This type of racism was quite common and likely reflects the fact that Poles generally have little opportunity to encounter cultural diversity (Mayblin, Valentine, and Winiarska 2016). For example, Sai felt uncomfortable when being stared at: “It’s a city of life but not for foreigners. When you take a bus, everyone is staring at you. It’s about skin color . . . , and I don’t want to change my skin color.” However, such incidents were also often marked with ambivalence. Informants sometimes found it difficult to interpret unequivocally the reasons for staring (Essed 1991). Previous studies on African migrants in Poland have suggested that those staying longer tend to perceive staring as an expression of curiosity rather than racism (Ząbek 2009). Yet we did not find a similar pattern in our data. Some of those who had lived in Poland for a longer period became accustomed to “racist” glances and neglected them. Others, despite staying in Poland for only a few months, interpreted staring in terms of curiosity from local residents.

Informants also had diverging opinions regarding the level of racism in Wrocław itself: some claimed that racism was prevalent, while others deemed it a more marginal phenomenon. Although we cannot authoritatively present the frequency of such incidents, we may discern certain patterns relating to victims, perpetrators, timing, and place. Migrants generally felt more vulnerable if they could be identified as Muslims and/or had darker skin, a finding corroborated by Poland's official statistics on racial crimes. According to the 2016 State Prosecutor Office's report, the most common targets of racist attacks in Poland were Muslims, Jews, Roma, and black people. In Wrocław, there were 129 cases in 2016 (approximately 8% of all cases in Poland). However, due to a lack of English knowledge among police officers, informants claimed that they usually did not report racist incidents. Thus, official data may understate the actual number of racial crimes and downplay racism's significance in Wrocław (State Prosecutor Office 2017).

Although reported perpetrators were often ordinary strangers (usually Polish men), there was one particular group that in informants' narratives was often responsible for racist harassment: "hooligans" and fans of the local football team, Śląsk. As for the place, direct racist incidents occurred most frequently in public places such as public transportation, bus and railway stations, streets, and the city center. No informant experienced direct racism in his or her workplace, which may be explained by the fact that all worked in multinational corporations with strict regulations on racial discrimination. The only exception was indirect racism toward refugees, which took the form of racist comments about Muslim refugees from Syria. Informants found the fear of Muslims to be quite prevalent, even among their educated Polish friends working in multinational companies. As Stijn from the Netherlands remarked,

I had a discussion that really stuck in my mind with a 26-year old girl. . . . Bachelor-degree level educated. . . and this was more related to the refugees. . . . But what she was saying really scared the crap out of me, because she was really saying that they are here to rape women, to steal everything.

It is worth stressing that although most racist incidents took place in public places with other people, victims did not report receiving help from those around them when such incidents occurred. Instead, informants reported two types of reactions from bystanders. The first was indifference. When a man rudely asked one informant, Jasmin, for money on a tram, other passengers did not react. As she recalled the situation, "They were very calm. They didn't say anything. . . . They were just listening." The second type of reaction was refusing to help or to give a testimony of racial abuse. As Blanka from Ukraine recalled,

Two of my friends were stalked by other people. . . . They heard words, "You're monkeys. . . . Go home, go back to Africa!" They were beaten a few times. When we addressed this issue to the police, they were very supportive and tried to help, but even

if they came back in 10 to 15 minutes to the place in which this happened, witnesses would say, "We saw nothing."

Although it is difficult to generalize based on our sample, the repeated experiences of lack of assistance from local residents seem to indicate a serious social problem. From a social-psychological viewpoint, such instances point to universal mechanisms of bystander effect and the diffusion of responsibility, both of which explain individuals' failure to help other people (Darley and Latané 1968). However, informants' observations must also be placed within the context of post-socialist societies, often described as displaying a "culture of distrust" that inhibits the development of civil society (Stivers 1994; Sztompka 1999). Such studies indicate that post-socialist societies have developed cultures of endemic distrust, which find expression in negative and passive attitudes toward public authorities, other people, and different forms of cooperation (Stivers 1994; Sztompka 1999). Jacobson and Korolczuk (2017), however, challenge this perspective for applying highly normative and narrow understandings of civil society and for neglecting less formal grassroots activism based on kin and friendship networks. Yet while such networks enable cooperation and trust among close networks, they may also reinforce exclusive identities and limit cooperation with members of outgroups (Field 2008; Portes and Landolt 2000). Thus, in Poland, distrust toward others could be reinforced by stereotypes and prejudices toward immigrants, making people less likely to help migrants, especially "visible" migrants who could be regarded as less worthy than "white" co-citizens. Nevertheless, this phenomenon requires further analysis, as our study focused on the victims, not the perpetrators or witnesses, of racism or racial incidents.

### *Making Sense of Racism*

Although informants experienced racism, many paradoxically seemed to have internalized the city's official image as a multicultural and open-minded *miasto spotkań* and projected their specific experiences of incorporation in a multicultural corporate environment onto Wrocław in general. Thus, some informants drew on local promotional discourse to make sense of the racial incidents they faced. In the process, they minimized racism in Wrocław by normalizing and marginalizing it per se. According to informants, racist incidents could occur anywhere and were committed by a small number of society's members who were unemployed, uneducated, or drunk. As Bilal argued, "That's not only in Poland. Everywhere you go out in the night . . . , if you see someone who gets drunk, he'll try to provoke you because you are a foreigner."

Others rationalized racism by evoking Polish nationalist victimhood mythology. They explained that Poland had a troublesome history of foreign invasions, making Poles distrustful toward "others." As Karim argued, "I think it's because of the history of Poland, that it has always been occupied by other countries." Yet other

interviewees illustrated the closed nature of Polish society, in which cultural homogeneity was a taken-for-granted norm. For example, James from the United Kingdom stated that “Poland is quite closed culturally. . . . Here, almost everybody is Polish, and when you find someone who isn’t, it’s more of an unusual situation.” Moreover, Sai spoke about religious homogeneity and “whiteness” as a daily experience: “Poland is a country of white Catholics, who got used to seeing only white Catholics all around.” Informants also described the media’s influence, especially in relation to spreading fear of Muslim refugees, which could instigate an aversion to immigrants in general. Thus, Bilal claimed that he understood “how scared the people are here. The reason, the principle is, the media. . . . People believe in media. . . . Poles are afraid that when the migrants come, they’ll change everything.”

### *Strategies for Coping with Racism*

Our study revealed various strategies for preserving a sense of self-worth and coping with racism. The most common was simply “ignoring” the offender, as mentioned by Carlos of Mexican and Japanese origins: “Walking in the city, after a night out, there would be some drunk people saying something. . . , but I think you can just ignore what they’re saying, and it’ll not lead to something bigger.” Typically, informants were too scared to confront perpetrators. They also did not know how to respond in situations involving micro-aggression, such as glares or stares. Not knowing Polish, interviewees often thought that their reactions would be ineffective and pointless. This strategy of not responding was frequently connected with what Lamont et al. (2016, 19; Goffman 1963) call “management of the self.” Through a deliberative effort to manage the “front-stage” presentation of the self, interviewees restrained their emotions and stayed silent in an attempt to avoid an escalating spiral of anger that was impossible to control and potentially lead to violence.

Another common strategy was withdrawal and avoidance. Interviewees shared stories about colleagues who asked their companies if they could transfer to another country, due to racist experiences. More often, however, interviewees decided not to speak in public in a foreign language. As we have already seen, some avoided certain places at certain times, especially the city center and nightclubs. Yet for most informants (who were young and single), this strategy of avoidance was not attractive. Rather than resigning from nightlife, they went to pubs or clubs with a larger group of international or Polish friends. This constitutes a fourth strategy: mobilizing friends, especially Polish friends from the workplace, as a kind of shield in troublesome situations, to talk to offenders and prevent the escalation of violence. The final strategy was seeking comfort in a multicultural milieu: attending places that were popular among high-skilled migrants, where participants felt secure being surrounded by people of similar status and background who spoke English.



## Racism, High-Skilled Migrants, and Neoliberalism

Although many informants believed that racism was a problem not only in Wrocław but nationwide, their coping strategies were rather individualistic in nature. They believed that they themselves had to find a solution to the problem of racism. As Bilal from Algeria claimed quite simply, “I can handle it.” They did not seek support from the wider community (with the exception of their networks of friends), rarely sought assistance from the police, and did not think about any collective action or social campaign against racism in Wrocław. Instead, they framed it in highly individualistic terms: they sought private solutions for problems that have more complex social roots. Such an approach appears to reflect their individualistic, career-oriented habitus of international professionals embedded in the neoliberal imaginary. They drew on a neoliberal global “cultural repertoire” (Bauman 2005; Sharff 2016), seeing social life not only in the model of market relations but also as an ongoing project organized around the individual who is solely responsible for his or her own well-being and future.

This analysis of lived experiences of racism among high-skilled migrants, thus, reveals an important paradox of hierarchical identities in the neoliberal imagery. Drawing on neoliberal global discourse, informants defined themselves primarily in terms of belonging to a group of international professionals who should not be linked with refugees or low-skilled migrants, even if they shared the same ethnic backgrounds. In their view, it was not ethnicity or race that defined them, but their occupational status and role in the global economy. In addition, referring to local promotional and branding discourse, they saw themselves as well-educated professionals who brought crucial skills and knowledge to Wrocław. In contrast to allegedly “burdensome” refugees or low-skilled migrants, they perceived themselves as important agents contributing to Wrocław’s economic development. As a result, on the one hand they were victims of racism, but on the other they reproduced a global neoliberal hierarchy of “desirable,” high-skilled migrants who stood in contrast to less “desirable” refugees and low-skilled migrants. By following the ideology of capital production and accumulation, they categorized “others,” not along racial lines but in terms of economic justification and developmental importance.

Even if in participants’ minds, the category of race was replaced by economic “usefulness,” the simplistic and essentialized divide between those who were “welcomed” and “unwelcomed” remained. Participants defined refugees and low-skilled migrants in terms of neoliberal unworthiness, creating a fixed boundary between professionals who were well educated and economically useful and migrants who lacked neoliberal market skills, were less worthy economically, and did not contribute to economic growth. Although officially they were “desirable” migrants and had a privileged status, this status did not protect them from racism on the part of the host society. Previous studies have stressed the local isolation of high-skilled migrants who, while leading neoliberal individualistic lives, create their own private spaces (Bauman 2005; Elliott and Lemert 2006). As we have seen, the local

incorporation of high-skilled migrant workers in Wrocław was also selective and mainly confined to the workplace. However, the reason was not only individualism but also social avoidance caused by these workers' lived experiences of racism. Yet it cannot be assumed that simply by virtue of experiencing racism, informants were free from other prejudices and essentializing stereotypes. Our study demonstrates that while encountering racism, they belonged to a relatively privileged group and reproduced existing neoliberal hierarchies of power. In doing so, it nuances the relations between the middling high-skilled migrant and receiving society.

## **Conclusions**

Drawing on qualitative research, this article has focused on the under-researched theme of high-skilled migration and racism in the new migratory context of the post-socialist city of Wrocław, Poland. Its empirical contribution lies in providing a detailed examination of various racial incidents, both subtle and overt, experienced by migrant professionals and in analyzing diverse means of making sense of and coping with racism. Beyond this empirical contribution, the article has four broader findings.

First, by documenting the wide range of racist incidents experienced by high-skilled migrants, this article challenges the assumption (cf. Sassen 2001; Nowicka 2006; Castells 2011; Nowicka 2012) that incorporation is a seamless process for migrants who live transnational lives in a neoliberal, undifferentiated global space unaffected by local customs and values (Kunz 2016). Although the social status of informants in this study situated them in a privileged position, it did not protect them from racial attacks, whether subtle or more overt. Thus, we provide a more nuanced understanding of high-skilled migrant incorporation, with our analysis demonstrating that one cannot presume that such migrants easily adapt to local conditions or are immune to locally embedded problems such as the racial prejudices routinely faced by low-skilled migrants (Croucher 2012; Kunz 2016).

Second, and at the same time, we demonstrate that it cannot be assumed that simply by virtue of experiencing racism, high-skilled migrants were themselves free from prejudices and stereotypes. Our study suggests that high-skilled migrants occupy a rather ambivalent position: on the one hand they were victims of racism, but on the other they themselves reproduced rigid boundaries between "desirable" and "undesirable" migrants, reflecting their privileged positioning in global hierarchies of power and neoliberal habitus. As exemplified by our study, high-skilled migrants followed the existing neoliberal imagery, in which some migrants were valorized because they were associated with economic development (tourists, knowledge and high-skilled migrants), while others invoked negative connotations and were perceived as the embodiment of "otherness" (undocumented migrants, refugees, low-skilled migrants) (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013).

Third, we argue that a global neoliberal imaginary shapes ways of dealing with racism. In contrast to other studies on reactions to racism (Houshmand, Spanierman,

and Tafarirodi 2014; Lamont et al. 2016), our research demonstrates that high-skilled migrants predominantly embraced individualist strategies of coping with racism. The rhetorical stance of “I can handle it” rarely involved seeking assistance from the wider community. Rather, informants presented a sense of agency and belief in self-responsibility and an individual approach to well-being or comfort, again reflecting their neoliberal habitus. Although they recognized racism’s social dimension in Wrocław (and Poland as a whole), they sought private solutions for social problems. In this way, they reproduced neoliberal assumptions about the social world, imagining it in terms of idealized market relations, which further normalized its hierarchies and inequalities as being solely dependent on individual initiatives and activities.

Fourth, although our study focuses on the lived experiences of high-skilled migrants in the local context of Wrocław, it is also a wider contribution as a “critical case study” (Flyvbjerg 2006). It allows us to draw a conclusion regarding the racial exclusiveness of the Polish host society in general and to challenge the conventional view that because Poland does not have a history of colonialism, it is free from racism (cf. Nowicka and Łodziński 2001; Ząbek 2009). Thus, if officially welcomed and “desirable” high-skilled migrants living in the relatively open city of Wrocław were the targets of racial attacks and insults, then we can assume that other, less “desirable” migrants in other local Polish contexts would also be the targets of racial prejudice. Consequently, racism in Poland may be more widespread than is usually assumed. Therefore, our analysis suggests the importance of racial boundaries in a non-Western society that has only recently been confronted with increased numbers of migrants. It would appear that in Polish society there is a reservoir of prejudice and discrimination, both open and subtle, due to visible cultural, religious, and phenotypic differences.

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